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ABSTRACT

Why do some educational partnerships endure while others soon meet their demise? Leaders of partnerships (N=62) report perceived reasons for their team's endurance vs. decline during telephone interviews. Data suggest strong predictors of partnership endurance (i.e., qualities cited very frequently by interviewees as essential to partnering), moderate predictors, and low predictors of endurance. Similarly, data from teams that disbanded fell into strong, moderate, and low predictors of a partnership's demise. The data provide an "insider's view" to what it is like to participate in a partnership and to the dynamics of those relationships. It informs leaders in the partnership movement of the conditions deemed essential to establishing and nourishing partnerships that lead to school reform. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/MM)

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Characteristics of Enduring Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Why do some educational partnerships endure while others soon meet their demise? Leaders of partnerships (N = 62) report perceived reasons for their team's endurance vs. decline during telephone interviews. Data suggest strong predictors of partnership endurance (i.e., qualities cited very frequently by interviewees as essential to partnering), moderate predictors, and low predictors of endurance. Similarly, data from teams that disbanded fell into strong, moderate, and low predictors of a partnership's demise. The data provide an "insider's view" to what it is like to participate in a partnership and to the dynamics of those relationships. It informs leaders in the partnership movement of the conditions deemed essential to establishing and nourishing partnerships that lead to school reform.

Increasingly across the past two decades, discussions about school reform advocated educational partnerships as a promising vehicle to provide resources, improve teaching, and enhance student learning. Indeed, collaboration among educators at all levels with state and local policymakers, business and industry representatives, parents, and the community at large is viewed as essential to bringing about significant change in education.

In the United States, the federal government recognized the need for schools to draw upon the resources of the business community in the early 1980s. As a result, partnerships sprang up around the country at an astonishing rate. By 1989, the Department of Education estimated that over 140,000 partnerships between schools and businesses existed nationwide (Rigden, 1991). The momentum to establish partnerships continues, as illustrated by the 1996 National Science Foundation invitational theme, Dynamic partnerships: Seeding and sustaining education reform, and NSF's interest in funding collaborative partnerships as the best means to achieve lasting reform in education (L.S. Willimas, personal communication, December 13, 1995). National organizations such as the Points of Light Foundation, established by then president George Bush, and the National Association for Partnerships in Education (NAPE) and its state affiliates coordinate and expand partnership efforts into businesses, industries, and agencies of all sizes.

The dynamic nature and scope of partnerships makes it difficult to succinctly describe what an educational partnership is. Rigden (1991) organizes partnerships along a continuum which highlights the variety of forms and activities partnerships can assume (see Figure 1). These include "adopt-a-school" relationships, originally proposed to link businesses with urban schools in order to improve employment opportunities for inner-city youths (Britt, 1985/86) and "great projects" partnerships in which volunteers from businesses or agencies work closely with schools for a specific innovation such as a new reading program or a science fair. In "reform based" or collaborative partnerships, businesses or agencies enter into long-term relationships with schools specifically to impact instruction, student learning, and teacher empowerment and ultimately to bring about school reform (Rigden, 1992).

Insert Figure 1

It seems, then, that there is no one blueprint for how partnerships should be configured or the types of activities in which they should engage (Sills, Barron, & Heath., 1993). In nearly a decade of working with educational partnerships, we observed that some partnership efforts were dynamic and active from their inception, while others never got off the ground. Some partnership teams suffered trauma to their membership or context yet endured, while others disbanded when faced with moderate or sometimes imagined stress from their environmental context. This led us to wonder what characterizes partnerships which endure (Bainer, 1998). If there is not one blueprint for partnerships, are there core characteristics essential to a partnership's effectiveness and endurance that can guide us in forming and sustaining educational partnerships?

Our study was initially directed at exploring the question: Why do partnerships endure? It assumed that endurance is an indicator of an effective partnering relationship. Further, it assumed that an enduring partnership effort is more likely to achieve its educational goals than partnerships that do not endure. This paper reports a study that asked participants in a reform-based partnership program what characteristics they thought were essential to a partnership's endurance or demise, based on their experience in elementary (K-6) school settings.

For the text of this paper, the term "partnership" refers to a relationship between two or more individuals or agencies, at least one of which is an educator, school, or school district. The term "resource professional" refers to an individual involved in a working relationship with educators aimed at sharing expertise in order to impact education. Resource professionals are generally from businesses, industries, or government, health care, or community agencies but may also be private citizens such as farmers or hobbyists who hold some content expertise, especially in science.

Models of Effective Partnerships

Cobb and Quaglia (1994) point out that we need to know more about partnerships in order to ensure successful school reform. The literature offers models of group efforts derived from investigating organizational systems (Hord, 1981), observing interactions during program evaluations (Wichienwong, 1988), and examining established partnerships between businesses and schools (Cobb and Quaglia, 1994; Sills et al., 1993). These models agree that the most effective partnerships are dynamic and interactive, work toward common goals, and are characterized by equality and a high level of commitment among group members (see Bainer, 1997, for a fuller discussion).

Research Study

Program Description

An essential first step to understanding the partnership experience is to investigate to what team members ascribe their effectiveness or demise. This question was explored with teachers and resource professionals participating in two branches of a funded program: Partnering for Elementary Environmental Science (PEES) and Sciencing with Watersheds, Environmental Education, and Partnerships (SWEEP) (Bainer, Barron, & Cantrell, 1998a, 1998b). The program sought primarily to provide professional development for elementary (K-6) classroom teachers in order to enhance science instruction and thereby to improve student learning.

The professional development thrust was threefold (see Bainer, Barron, and Cantrell, 1996/96). First, the program overcame teachers' apprehension about teaching activity-based science by engaging them in hands-on learning and debriefing them about the experience from their (i.e., the learner's) point of view and from the facilitator or teacher's perspective. Discussions focused on how to plan, implement, and evaluate hands-on learning experiences as well as how to manage students and materials for these activities. Second, the program acquainted teachers with readily available, inexpensive resources and agency-sponsored science and environmental education programs by providing a library of materials. Internationally recognized programs such as Project Learning Tree, Project WET, and Project Wild were represented as well as instructional trade books. Participants perused the materials and used them in their planning, engaged in activities from these resources so they could "get a feel" for the programs, and

purchased selected resources for classroom use using funds provided by the project. Finally, and most important for this report, teachers' lack of science content knowledge was addressed by pairing them with science content experts (i.e., resource professionals). Most of these resource professionals were employees of the state Department of Natural Resources (divisions of wildlife, forestry, soil and water conservation, geological survey, parks and recreation, recycling and litter prevention, reclamation, natural areas and preserves, water, and real estate and land management) or county recycling, parks and recreation, soil and water conservation, or health agencies. Other content experts represented the Environmental Protection Agency, local conservation and environmental groups, and science-related businesses (Meade Paper Company and Lockheade Martin). In addition, a few retired farmers, horticulturists, and teachers with strong applied science backgrounds volunteered as resource professionals. The goal was to establish reform-based partnerships committed to collaborative, school-based work for at least one year, and dedicated to improving science instruction.

During a short, intensive summer institute, teachers and resource professionals were trained in pedagogy and partnering skills, developed their partnering relationship, identified curriculum and learning goals, and planned lessons to meet those goals across the upcoming academic year. Two day-long conferences were held during the academic year to bring the partnership teams together to share, evaluate, reflect, socialize, solve problems, and learn about new resources. In addition, participants periodically received newsletters and site visits from project staff or members of other teams, and project staff were available for consultation throughout the year.

The program engaged nearly 400 individuals in partnership teams across the five years of state and federal funding, all in one mid-western state. Partnership teams ranged in size from two members (one teacher and one resource professional) to seven (five teachers and two resource professionals). Most partnerships consisted of two or three teachers working with one resource professional, however. Two-thirds of the teams were based in rural or small town elementary (K-6) schools, with the remainder in suburban and urban settings.

Research Design

One year after the funding ceased, we wondered how many of the partnerships were still functioning and why some partnerships endured while others met an early demise.

In-depth telephone interviews with all team leaders (n=62) and focus groups with selected team members (n = 26) were conducted to ascertain which partnership teams persisted beyond the funding period and to understand the nature of their partnership experience. The prearranged telephone interviews asked leaders to describe the relationship among their partnership team members, any changes in their team's membership over the years, and any crises their team had encountered. They were asked to what they attributed their team's endurance or demise, and to provide any additional information that would help others understand the partnership experience. Focus groups, each with 10-12 individuals who had participated in partnerships for at least one year, responded to similar questions.

The data were transcribed, content analyzed, then verified by independent researchers. In an on-going, inductive analysis (Patton, 1990), interview data were

organized by themes that appeared in response to various questions. The patterns that emerged from the data became more obvious as the number of completed interviews increased and this data was merged with focus group data. Through this scrutinization of data, three categories of characteristics were apparent (Althrichter, Posch, & Somekn, 1993). These clusters seemed to represent strong, moderate, and low predictors of a partnership's endurance or demise.

Results

Of the 62 team leaders interviewed, 57 were teachers, three were resource professionals, and two were school administrators. Thirty-one of the leaders reported that their partnerships were still active. Of these, six teams had completed one year of partnering, 12 teams completed two years, and seven and six teams completed three and four years of partnering respectively. All of these teams planned to continue their activity at least through the current academic year. The remaining 31 teams had disbanded, according to their leaders' interviews. Three of those teams never made it through their first year of partnering. Nineteen teams disbanded at the end of their one-year commitment to the program. Other teams continued before disbanding: two teams partnered for two years, two teams completed three years of partnering, and five teams worked together for four years before disbanding. Considering both active and inactive teams, the mean years of partnering before disbanding was two, the median was two years, and the mode was one year (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1

Reasons why partnerships endure. Responses to interviews and focus groups suggested seven characteristics of partnerships which were most frequently mentioned as reasons why the partnership endured. These "strong predictors" are (see Table 2):

1. A strong resource professional who generates ideas, works well with children, gathers resources, prepares in advance for activities, provides access to other resource professionals, provides content knowledge, is enthusiastic, and is a motivator.
2. Commitment to the program, including taking the program seriously, determining to finish the year-long plan, and committing time and resources to the program.
3. Assistance in the classroom, specifically having the team members, parents, and/or volunteers assist with gathering resources, making phone calls, and dong the "legwork" required of an activity-based, thematic curriculum.
4. Collaboration and interaction with other adults (teachers and resource professionals) who serve as sounding boards, enjoy working and learning from each other, fill in gaps in each others' knowledge of science and pedagogy, share similar expectations, and are trustworthy.
5. A commitment to science education and the environment, including a desire to make science learning fun, to provide an educationally sound program, to meet the district and state science objectives, and to share a love of science and the environment and, ideally, to instill environmental stewardship in students.
6. Benefits for the children such as challenging them toward higher order thinking and problem solving, providing resource professionals as role models, and providing positive learning experiences to enable them to learn content more readily, to work

with students from other grade levels, and to relate concepts they learned in science to the "real world" of the environment.

7. Positive relationships among partners including shared interests and age cohorts, and compatible philosophies, attitudes toward children and instructional approaches. Team members often shared that collaboration was easy because team members enjoyed working and learning together and because they thought alike and helped each other solve problems. Consequently, strong friendships sometimes formed.

Four "moderate predictors," or qualities mentioned less frequently as reasons why partnerships endure, were identified in the content analysis of the interviews and focus groups. These are:

1. Excitement and satisfaction with the program because of the hands-on learning and field trips it encourages, the questions it raises in students' minds which they subsequently explore, the positive reactions of students to the program, and the long term changes seen in students' behavior and learning.
2. Professional growth and development, especially in the areas of student management, science content, and team-building. Expanded community networks through which to learn of professional development opportunities and resources were also a plus.
3. Parents who share excitement for the program, support and volunteer for the program, and request that their children be involved in the program.
4. Administrative support providing program visibility within the building and district, and facilitating the expansion of the program to include additional teachers and classrooms.

Five "low predictors" of partnership endurance were suggested from the content analysis of the interviews and focus groups. These qualities were mentioned less frequently than moderate predictors, and much less frequently than strong predictors. They are:

1. Equity, especially that all team members cooperate and share leadership.
2. Flexibility about scheduling and communication.
3. Positive relationships with children, notably being accepted as a regular teacher in team teaching situations, having an opportunity to work with children, and the enthusiasm and "hugs" offered by the children toward the team members.
4. Benefits for the school including money raised from recycling projects, development of land labs and outdoor classrooms, and professional growth provided by project team members for other teachers in the school and district.
5. Benefits for the community such as recycling activities and park clean up.

Insert Table 2

Reasons for partnerships' demise. Similarly, the interviews and focus group data provided by members and leaders of teams which were no longer in existence were examined for characteristics which led to their demise. Based on frequency of mention, these were categorized as "strong," "moderate," or "low predictors" of the demise of a partnership.

Five qualities were suggested as "strong predictors" of partnership demise, as follows (see Table 3):

1. Lack of commitment by the resource professional, demonstrated by not wanting to partner, to work with children, or to make a long-term often because of competing demands for time.
2. Job change for the resource professional such as being transferred to another position or shifting job responsibilities, often leading to withdrawal from the partnership.
3. Lack of commitment by the partnering agency, as illustrated by a lack of long-term support for the program, especially for the time off required by resource professionals to participate in an extended partnership.
4. Job change for the teacher, including move to another grade level, content area, or building or the reorganization of the school or teaching location.
5. Lack of relationship among partners, experienced as incompatibility of philosophy, energy level, personality, or "power level," lack of common interests, lack of consideration and mutual support, lack of critical mass and support in small (i.e., two member) partnerships, and lack of communication. Frequently, leaders observed that partners "just didn't click."

"Moderate predictors" of the demise of partnerships include four qualities reported less frequently by team members and leaders. These are:

1. Trauma or drastic change such as the loss of a teacher or resource professional as a team member through death, maternity or sick leave, or moving, loss of a classroom through school reorganization, loss of a land lab, or strike threats.
2. Lack of commitment by teachers because of competing demands or programs already at the school, misunderstanding about the length of the program commitment, or mismatch with the program's goals.

3. Proximity, that is, teachers located in different buildings or the resource professional based a significant distance from the school.
4. Lack of equity demonstrated in a partnership in which all team members did not share the responsibility for planning, preparation, and communication, and nor did they share professional knowledge.

Six "mild predictors" of the demise of partnerships, mentioned infrequently, were apparent in the data including:

1. Weak resource professional who does not work well with children, participates and communicates minimally, and is perceived as inflexible.
2. Lack of commitment to the program by the school administration, evidenced by failure to provide resources and support, and unawareness of the program's activities.
3. Negative workplace relationships, especially resentment from other teachers not involved with the program.
4. Outmoded professional development as when teachers feel they "outgrew" the partnership or have been sufficiently empowered by the partnership that they no longer need the formal relationship.
5. Curriculum changes, including a change in the course of study and grade level topics, a year-long plan that proves to be unrealistic, or too many grades or different courses of study involved in one partnership.
6. Parents, specifically those who complain about the activity-based nature of the program or those who cause resentment among teachers by requesting transfers of their children to classrooms participating in the program.

Insert Table 3

Discussion

If a partnership's endurance is a proxy for its effectiveness, it is important to understand what contributes to endurance or demise. Reviewing the predictors of partnership endurance helps us understand the partnerships established in this funded program (PEES and SWEEP). Recall that the programs targeted reform-based partnerships which, by definition, are long term (at least one year), supported by multiple levels within the school and partnering agency, goal-oriented, collaborative, and focused on enhancing science instruction.

Core Qualities

A closer review of the predictors of partnership endurance provides insights into the core qualities and values that enable these partnerships to endure. The strongest predictors present a picture of visionary, collaborative partnership which transforms science education and the way we do schooling, and touches the lives of those involved. The core qualities of enduring partnerships are *commitment* (to the program, to improving science education, to the environment, and to children) and *collaboration* (in word, attitude, and action at all levels of classroom-related responsibility). They speak of a new way of thinking about and doing things in the classroom; of a new mindset about education and new work and interaction habits. Moderate and low predictors of endurance share excitement for the *level of support* felt from stakeholders in education (colleagues, students, parents, and administration). The partners felt this support for who they are (expressed as equitable treatment, respect for their schedules, and encouraging their professional growth) and for what they do (provide an innovative program that challenges students, enhance the school facility, provide community service projects). In

the literature on school reform, teachers are often chided for their lack of vision. Further, teachers experience isolation and are frustrated by a perceived lack of respect and support for them as individuals and as professionals. Participants in partnerships that endure, it seems, have surmounted these limitations and created a working relationship that holds promise for long term school improvement and reform, at least in science education.

A review of the core qualities of partnerships that met their demise reinforces the qualities already discussed. Although the vast majority of the partnerships functioned for one to four years before disbanding, the reasons for their demise are a mirror image of the qualities attributed to endurance. Prominent are the *lack of commitment* (by partners, schools, and agencies), *lack of support* for the program from the stakeholders (colleagues, parents, administration, agencies), and *inability or unwillingness to adjust to change* (in job responsibilities, teaching assignments, or to traumatic changes in the lives of team members).

Interestingly, the barriers which led to the demise of these partnerships (incompatibility among team members, distance, lack of equity, change, lack of support) were also experienced by many partnerships that endured. Why did some teams endure while others did not? First, it may be that while the internal and external barriers experienced by the two groups were the same, how they handled them was different. Second, the collaborative or problem-solving skills may have been greater for partnerships that endured. Third, perhaps it was a matter of greater or a different kind of commitment by the enduring partnerships. After all, there was no hint from disbanded partnerships of a larger vision for schooling and science education or commitment to such a vision; rather there was commitment to the project and its related responsibilities.

Commitment to a vision and to the other members of the partnership led to successful partnering, support, respect, and other intangible rewards that motivated the enduring teams to "keep on" in spite of change, trauma, or other barriers. Partnership teams with less focus and visionary commitment may not have experienced the positive reinforcement of support and respect, thus the decision to disband when barriers were encountered. Indeed, one wonders if the reasons shared for the demise of the partnerships are really excuses or proxies for lack of commitment and vision.

Reform-based Partnering

This program endeavored to establish reform-based partnerships which would initiate school reform efforts in their schools. Reform-based partnerships are characterized by long-term commitment, support from multiple levels, and collaboration. A review of the data just discussed suggests that the 31 enduring partnerships may indeed have been reform-based partnerships. The 31 partnerships which disbanded may not have been based at that end of the partnership continuum (see Figure 1). They were cooperative efforts that provided sound educational experiences for a number of months, but did not lead to sustained, collaborative reform of science instruction or schooling. This suggests that the program was only partially successful in achieving its goal of establishing reform-based partnerships.

: Lessons Learned: Conclusion and Implications

The data and discussion suggest that modifications in the approach to establishing partnership teams which may increase their endurance and their effectiveness at enhancing science instruction. The lessons learned from this partnership study include the following.

1. *Instill and Maintain Commitment to a Vision* - Perhaps when individuals are selected to participate in partnerships they should be screened based on their willingness and ability to engage in long-term commitments. Their capacity for visionary thinking should also be considered. Partnership training should focus strongly on instilling and sharing a vision for instructional change and school reform. Throughout the program, this vision must be reinforced, encouraged, and maintained. The funded program studied was, perhaps, not selective enough based on commitment and vision. While participants were aware of and reminded of the long-term commitment, little emphasis was placed on developing visionary goals and commitments as partnership teams. More immediate, instructional goals were the focus. Day-long conferences were held twice during the academic year to reinforce and re-ignite teams as they shared their progress, triumphs, and challenges. While these conferences were effective, more interactions and networking should be encouraged to create a "critical mass" of partnership teams which can continually, mutually reinforce each others' vision and commitment. Electronic networks now widely available may be effective for this and overcome the distance and scheduling barriers which limit the effectiveness of face-to-face group meetings.

2. *Build Skills in Eliciting Support* - If reform-based partnerships (and school reform in general) are dependent on multiple levels of support from a variety of stakeholders, it is essential that partnership members acquire skills in gaining that support. Teachers, especially, have historically not developed the skills to be politically astute or active. Most would rather focus their energies and efforts on the business of teaching and learning. But in today's changing educational context, instructional change

and school reform require support. Partnership members need to be trained in and to value diplomacy and effective communication skills, including the ability to listen, to ask open-ended questions, paraphrase, summarize, and synthesize information in a non-judgmental and non-defensive way. They need to know how to network to effectively promote themselves and their programs within and outside of the school while gaining support rather than jealousy from their colleagues. They need to know how to build respect and trust among the stakeholders in today's education. These elements should be part of partnership training if those endeavors are to endure and to be effective.

3. *Build Skills in Handling Change* - Finally, partnership team members need to be aware of the kinds of challenges and changes they will encounter and to develop the skills and strategies to deal effectively with change. This may mean temporarily adjusting the organizational structure of the partnership, redefining responsibilities within the partnership, or thinking about curriculum or partnering in new ways. While personal qualities of flexibility and sensitivity are essential, equally important are acquired skills in handling change.

Conclusion

Reform-based partnerships depend on commitment, support, collaboration, and flexibility for endurance and effectiveness. While partnerships may disband for many reasons, these may be proxies for a lack of visionary commitment, lack of support, and inability or unwillingness to change. In order to establish partnerships that will endure and thus promote instructional change and school reform, organizers need to equip partnership team members with skills in eliciting multi-levels of support and handling change. Even more important, they need to instill and maintain a commitment to

collaboration and to a vision of educational change, in the classroom and in the larger educational community.

Figure 1: Partnering Continuum (after Rigden, 1991)

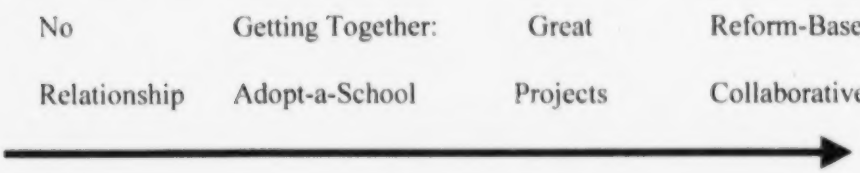

Table 1: Partnership Endurance Trends

	Years of Endurance				
Status	0	1	2	3	4
Active	0	6	12	7	6
Inactive	3	19	2	2	5
Total	3	25	14	9	11

(X = 2 years; M = 2 years; mode = 1 year of activity)

Table 2: Characteristics of Partnerships that Endure

Strong Predictors:

1. Strong Resource Professional
2. Commitment to the Program
3. Assistance in the Classroom
4. Collaboration
5. Commitment to Science Education or the Environment
6. Benefits for Children
7. Positive Relationship among Partners

Moderate Predictors:

1. Excitement and Satisfaction with the Program
2. Professional Growth and Development
3. Parents
4. Administrative Support

Mild Predictors:

1. Equity
2. Flexibility
3. Positive Relationships with Children
4. Benefits for the School
5. Benefits for the Community

Table 3: Characteristics of Partnerships' Demise

Strong Predictors:

1. Lack of Commitment by Resource Professional
2. Job Change for Resource Professional
3. Lack of Commitment by Partnering Agency
4. Job Change for Teacher
5. Lack of Relationship among Partners

Moderate Predictors:

1. Trauma or Drastic Changes
2. Lack of Commitment by Teacher
3. Proximity
4. Lack of Equity

Mild Predictors:

1. Weak Resource Professional
2. Lack of Commitment by School Administration
3. Negative Workplace Relationships
4. Outmoded Professional Development
5. Curriculum Changes
6. Parents

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